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Contagious Deadly Sins: Yellow Fever in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans Literature

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
the University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
American Literature

by
Kathleen Downes
B.A. Florida State University, 2005

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Abstract

Throughout the nineteenth century, New Orleans was repeatedly plagued by yellow fever epidemics. In this paper, cultural representations of yellow fever are considered in three novels: Baron Ludwig Von Reizenstein's *The Mysteries of New Orleans* (1854-1855), George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880), and Mollie Evelyn Moore Davis' *The Queen's Garden* (1900). Because the etiology was unknown during the nineteenth century, yellow fever becomes a floating signifier on which to project the ills they observed in New Orleans society. Yellow fever thus becomes a representation of loose sexual mores, as well as a divinely retributive punishment for slavery, or a sign of adherence to an unequal, antiquated, aristocratic and un-American social system. Yellow fever, in these texts, exposes the struggles with race and racial superiority and illuminates tensions between groups of whites as New Orleans became an American city.

The Grandissimes, George Washington Cable, *The Queen's Garden*, Mollie Evelyn Moore Davis, *The Mysteries of New Orleans*, Baron Ludwig von Reizenstein, yellow fever, immigration, Haiti

Introduction

No discussion of yellow fever in New Orleans can begin without first examining its role in the Haitian Revolution. In October of 1801, Toussaint L'Ouverture, after a successful slave revolt against France, introduced a new constitution that abolished slavery. This constitution prompted Napoleon Bonaparte, in November of that year, to send General Victor-Emmanuel Charles Leclerc and forty-three thousand troops to Haiti to regain control from L'Ouverture and reestablish slavery. The French did not fare well against the revolutionary forces, as Ned Sublette recounts in *The World that Made New Orleans*. He writes, "the resistance of the black Domingans [sic] was ferocious," but "French soldiers and sailors died of yellow fever even faster than they could be killed" (196). General Leclerc himself died of yellow fever in November of 1802. By the end of the bloody conflict, of the forty-three thousand men that went, only eight thousand had survived. To cut his losses, Bonaparte sold New Orleans and the Louisiana territory to the United States on May 2, 1803. Thus, yellow fever played a key role in the Louisiana Purchase and the subsequent Americanization of New Orleans. At the same time, yellow fever became intimately linked to American fears of slave insurrection and issues of race.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the etiology of yellow fever was unknown. Today, we know that yellow fever is an acute viral hemorrhagic fever. The virus has two phases of infection. After the initial incubation period of three to six days, the patient enters the first phase of infection which causes symptoms similar to that of influenza. The patient may experience fever, headache, muscle aches (primarily backache), shivers, nausea, and vomiting. Most patients recover after this phase and are gifted with life immunity from the virus. However, in some cases, the patient enters into the second and toxic phase of the disease. After a brief remission in which the patient appears to have recovered, the patient experiences organ failure and develops jaundice, which causes the yellow skin color that gives the disease its name. The patient may

have bleeding in the eyes, mouth, and stomach. Blood also appears in the vomit and feces. The Spanish called this illness “Vomito Negro” because of the partially digested blood from stomach bleeding that colors the patient’s vomit black. Fifty percent of the patients that enter this phase will die within ten to fourteen days.

Walter Reed’s discovery in 1900 of yellow fever’s transmission by the female *Aedes aegypti* mosquito led to mosquito control measures that eliminated the species and thus the virus from North America. However, yellow fever is not a disease of the past. It is estimated that every year 200,000 people are infected and 30,000 will die of the virus. Ninety percent of these cases are in Africa with the remainder appearing in Latin America. Due to urbanization, deforestation, and limited access to vaccination, it is believed that these numbers are climbing.

Yellow fever, or its carrier, the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, is thought to have been introduced into the Western Hemisphere by slave ships coming from Africa. The Caribbean or West Indies provided a perfect climate for the incubation of the virus. In the Southern United States, the first frost usually wiped out the mosquito population, thus causing the disease to disappear until the following summer, when the slave and trade ships coming from the West Indies would reintroduce the virus and the mosquito population would have regained healthy numbers. The disease was and is particularly deadly in urbanized regions. During the nineteenth century, most households in New Orleans relied on cisterns as a source of clean water, which was the prime breeding ground for mosquitos. Many people would leave urban areas for the summer months, favoring cooler and less swampy climates, thus lessening their exposure to mosquitos.

Yellow fever’s transmission and the issues surrounding immunity to the disease greatly complicated the social structures of the recently acquired Louisiana Territory. Many nineteenth-

century theories of the cause of yellow fever pointed to sanitation and poverty, the major cause of most other epidemics, like cholera. However, the actual transmission of the virus made these theories suspect because the illness was not confined to the poorer neighborhoods of New Orleans where sewage, livestock, and other refuse filled the streets. A brimming cistern in the back of a wealthy home could just as easily house the mosquito that spread yellow fever.

Immunity was more obviously selective. The least hit demographic group was African Americans, challenging prevailing beliefs about race and racial superiority. It is thought that yellow fever most likely originated in Africa and that many of the slaves brought to America may also have brought with them immunity to the fever and passed it on to their progeny. Benjamin Trask points out in his book *Fearful Ravages: Yellow Fever in New Orleans 1796-1905* that “black resistance to yellow fever was universally acknowledged” (31). This fact about yellow fever was manipulated by both abolitionist and pro-slavery propagandists, however, as Sarah Klotz points out in her essay “Black, White, and Yellow Fever: Contagious Race in *The Mysteries of New Orleans*.” She explains that “[b]oth groups saw the disease as emanating from foreign locales and black bodies” (241). To reinforce white superiority, myths circulated that African Americans had a kind of primal, earthy knowledge of the disease, or even a supernatural ability to control it. Narratives consistently linked yellow fever with Voodoo. Michelle Y. Gordon, in her essay “‘Midnight Scenes and Orgies’: Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy,” explains that “[s]ince slavery, Voodoo accounts [by whites] had helped ‘authenticate’ fundamental rationalizations of white supremacy. . . . Public narratives of Voodoo ‘verified’ . . . the inexorable barbarity of its [New Orleans] inhabitants of African descent” (769). Narratives about yellow fever that employ Voodoo elements legitimated yellow fever as a retributive scourge for both slavery and racial

inequality; however, these same narratives encouraged essentialist and white supremacist beliefs about race. Moreover, yellow fever's devastating impact in the Haitian revolution, after which New Orleans received many refugees, including slaves and free people of color, combined with the relative immunity of African Americans, played into white fears of slave revolt. Many were concerned that the presence of yellow fever could be a sign of the imminent threat of slave insurrection.

The demographic groups hardest hit by yellow fever were made up of immigrating Europeans and Americans migrating south after the Louisiana Purchase. Native-born New Orleanians had a greater chance of contracting the disease in their youth during which survival rate is highest. Because of the clear distinction that the disease's immunity draws between newcomer and native, nativist narratives circulated that painted the fever as a "stranger's disease," casting the populations of immigrating Europeans and Americans as sickly and unfit for life in the city. Many narratives supported this belief by referring to the inhospitable climate of heat and humidity to which the newcomer was unacclimated and working under such conditions only weakened the newcomer's constitution making him more susceptible to disease. Lafcadio Hearn, who immigrated to America in 1869 from Ireland and arrived in New Orleans by way of Cincinnati in 1877, describes a process in which a newly arrived individual must physically acclimate to the climate of this region. Hearn warns in his sketch "The Creole Doctor: Some Curiosities of Medicine in Louisiana" that the newly arrived individual in New Orleans must take extra caution until the process of acclimatization is complete. He warns that "[d]uring this process of enervation the stranger is particularly liable to fever. . . . The acclimated citizen rarely suffers from these maladies; but woe to the incautious and energetic stranger who attempts to live in this subtropical and pyrogenic region, indifferent to the danger of excessive fatigue, or

the perils of self-exposure to sudden changes of temperature” (65-66). Hearn’s warning subscribes to the nativist belief that the newcomer was too weak upon arrival to work in the hot, humid climate of New Orleans and thus is physically unfit for life in New Orleans and more susceptible to disease.

Also bolstering the nativist argument is what Benjamin Trask refers to as the “Seaman’s Fate.” New Orleans, as a port city, attracted a large transient population who left their families behind in pursuit of wealth. These populations, freed from social responsibility, were believed to live a life of excessive physical indulgences, taking part in gambling, prostitution, and drunkenness. The nativist narratives highlight the “stranger’s” inability to withstand the harsh climate; however they also reveal the newcomer to be more inclined towards a life of excessive physical indulgences, weakening his constitution, not just physically but morally as well.

At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, tensions were high between new arrivals and the current citizens who were very resistant to being Americanized. During the four decades that preceded the Louisiana Purchase, New Orleans had changed governmental hands four times. Originally colonized by France, New Orleans was given to Spain under the Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762. In 1802, under the Third Treaty of San Ildefonso, Spain returned Louisiana to France. And a year later, the French sold the territory to the United States. The shift from French to Spanish rule in 1762 was less disruptive culturally than the shift to American rule after the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. Joseph Tregle, Jr. explains in his essay “Creoles and Americans” that “[l]ike France, Spain was monarchic, her culture Latin, grounded in Roman law and Catholicism” (134). The Americans, however, were predominantly protestant democratic republicans. In other words, the nation now controlling New Orleans stood in direct opposition to their entire way of life: culturally, religiously, and politically. By the same token, migrant and

immigrant populations had to negotiate Latin culture, politics, and religion. In his book *Sword of Pestilence: The New Orleans Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1853*, John Duffy points specifically to the role of French Catholicism which newcomers believed to be “exceedingly liberal and understanding of human frailties.” The asceticism of Irish Catholicism and the puritanism of Protestantism found these liberalities to be the root cause of the vice and sin in which “much of New Orleans’ reputation for wickedness arose,” and this reputation was perpetuated by “the jaundiced reports of sturdy New Englanders desperately fighting losing battles with their consciences” (5). To combat the nativist narratives of yellow fever, immigrating Europeans and migrating Americans associated the disease with the social crimes committed by those native to New Orleans.

Due to the fact that yellow fever’s etiology was unknown, authors used the disease as a floating signifier with which to criticize the practices and beliefs of their current society. Priscilla Wald, in her book *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, explains that

[l]iterary depictions of plague-ridden societies evince the complex vocabulary through which members of a ravaged populations both respond to epidemics and experience the social connections that make them a community. The word *contagion* means literally “to touch together,” and one of its earliest usages in the fourteenth century referred to the circulation of ideas and attitudes. . . . The circulation of disease and the circulation of ideas were material and experiential, even if not visible. Both displayed the power and danger of bodies in contact and demonstrated the simultaneous fragility and tenacity of social bonds. (12-13)

Yellow fever's presence signified for nineteenth century New Orleanians a cultural sickness that was contagious, even if the disease itself was not. Representations of yellow fever in three nineteenth-century novels written in New Orleans, show how yellow fever was employed to signify a culture that is sick with greed and resists reform by upholding an unequal caste system, both with reference to class and race. These literary representations of yellow fever particularly expose the struggles about race in America during and after slavery. These novels also illuminate tensions between European immigrants, American migrants, and the native populations of New Orleans as the city became Americanized.

Ludwig von Reizenstein's *The Mysteries of New Orleans* was serially published in 1854-1855 just after the 1853 yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans. Exploring the immigrant experience in New Orleans and by extension America, Reizenstein is highly critical not only of the Creole culture but also what he views as the hypocrisy in American democracy, a political system that touts liberty but still supports the institution of slavery. Reizenstein characterizes yellow fever as a divine scourge for slavery and uses this tale of an epidemic to expose the inherent greed of a capitalistic economy. George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes*, published in 1880 soon after the horrific yellow fever epidemic of 1878, is set in the years following the Louisiana Purchase. Although writing at the end of Reconstruction, Cable uses the Americanization of New Orleans to comment on his contemporary society's struggle to move past slavery and the plantation system. In his construction, yellow fever stems from the enslavement of humans but continuously plagues society for its inability to accept change and move towards racial equality. Finally, Mollie Evelyn Moore (M.E.M.) Davis's novel *The Queen's Garden*, published in 1900, just as the cause of yellow fever was being discovered, also explores the migrant American's experience in New Orleans. Yellow fever, in Davis's novel,

represents an acclimatizing to the sensuous life of New Orleans. However, as in Cable's novel, yellow fever's recurrence is a punishment for the way New Orleans society upholds an aristocratic caste system, which in Davis's opinion is a far graver sin than succumbing merely to the sensuality of the city.

The depictions of yellow fever within these texts link the disease with the larger social struggle between newcomers and the native-born. These depictions explore the struggle over the Americanization of New Orleans and the struggle over the issues of race and white supremacy in the South. They call into question the political and economic practices of a European aristocratic system, but also the legitimacy of American capitalist democracy and whether the freedom it claimed to uphold was really obtainable by all.

Chapter 1: Contagious Greed

Baron Ludwig von Reizenstein published *Die Geheimnisse von New Orleans* as a serial publication in the German newspaper *Louisiana Staats-Zeitung* in 1854. Steve Rowan, in the introduction to his 2002 translation of the novel titled *The Mysteries of New Orleans*, points out that the text, participating in the Urban Mysteries genre established earlier by *The Mysteries of Paris* and *The Mysteries of London*, “dealt with an existing city, well known to its readership but portrayed as a sinister place where events are steered by forces beyond the control of ordinary mortals” (xxvi). *The Mysteries of New Orleans* reveals the German immigrant experience in New Orleans through the exploration of the seedy underbelly of the city and sets out to reveal the hypocrisy in its French Catholic culture. Like Cable and Davis, Reizenstein is highly critical of the Creole native-born culture of New Orleans, but Reizenstein's scope extends even further by exposing the hypocrisy inherent in American democratic capitalism. Reizenstein characterizes

yellow fever as a divine scourge afflicting a hypocritical political and economic system that touts liberation, but is so focused on monetary gain that it cannot see the immorality of slavery.

Reizenstein, who emigrated from Germany to the U.S. in 1848, wrote his novel during and after the 1853 yellow fever epidemic. This epidemic was particularly devastating; as Duffy explains, “[w]ithin four and a half months, a tenth of the population died and over 40 percent sickened” (vii). Reizenstein’s own demographic—German immigrants—were particularly devastated by the disease. In a twist on the narrative that illness stems from immoral behavior, Reizenstein’s text focuses on the innocent deaths caused by the actions of the immoral and depraved. What is ultimately contagious, in Reizenstein’s text, are the attitudes and practices of American democratic capitalism that lead a person to commit immoral and depraved acts to acquire wealth, the gravest act being the enslavement of other human beings. These sins are committed not by the newly arrived immigrants, but by the native citizens of New Orleans and those immigrants who have acclimated to the culture of the city and the American political system. In Reizenstein’s text, yellow fever exists in New Orleans as a scourge for slavery. This sickness, however, does not affect those who are complicit in the sins of capitalistic greed and slavery, but finds its victims among the innocents. Ironically, survival is predicated on the relinquishing of one’s morality. Affliction with the disease is a sign of one’s moral purity. Reizenstein highlights the immoral institutions and practices of New Orleans and by extension American society and the chaotic retribution that can be expected. Reizenstein is not offering a solution for the ills of Creole and American society. His vision for the future is apocalyptic at best. Despite his abolitionist stance, however, Reizenstein’s depictions of yellow fever still reinforced racialized narratives of white superiority by describing African Americans as

primitive, sensuous, animalistic, and supernatural. While Reizenstein's text clearly advocates for the abolition of slavery, the narrator's portrayal of race is more complicated.

Reizenstein's novel contains many intertwined plotlines, at the center of which is an aristocratic German family recently immigrated to New Orleans. Emil, his wife Jenny, her sister Frida, and Frida's husband Lajos arrive first and are followed by Emil's parents and siblings. Not long after Emil's arrival in New Orleans, Emil leaves his wife Jenny for a mulatto woman named Lucy Wilson. Also featured in Reizenstein's novel is a strange and supernatural figure named Hiram whose mission is to infect the South with yellow fever until the day that slavery is abolished. Hiram lures Emil and Lucy into his plot to produce a liberator for the African-American slaves. Emil and Lucy's union will give birth to a mixed race child who will be this liberator, and his name will be Toussaint L'Ouverture. By invoking the name of the Haitian liberator, Reizenstein plays upon the fears of slave insurrection that followed the successful revolt against French forces in Haiti. By portraying yellow fever as punishment for slavery, Reizenstein draws on images of yellow fever as the divine force that led to the success of the revolt in Haiti. Despite Emil's role in Hiram's plan to abolish slavery, Emil acclimates to the sinful society of New Orleans, taking an active part in slaveholding and ultimately dooming his family to death by yellow fever.

To subvert the native-born narrative of acclimatization, Reizenstein describes his acclimated characters as physically displaying a kind of rotting from within that often resembles the symptoms of yellow fever. Reizenstein reveals these characters to be carriers of a kind of sickness that derives from the hypocrisy and greed he believes to be inherent in the society of New Orleans. In a hypocritical French priest who actively takes part in sexual slavery, Reizenstein describes a man whose "entire manner, his slack facial features, his unsteady,

unclean gaze, continually leering at the rows of the girls, testified to his identity as a man who had plunged to the depths. . . . His face had that indeterminate color between that of one recovering from yellow fever and that of a drunken decadent” (52). Another such character whose greed is visible in a sickly appearance approximating yellow fever is an Italian travelling merchant who is rumored to have taken advantage of an immigrant heiress, having promised to marry her in exchange for money, and to have murdered her. He is described as one whose “continuous excesses in all sorts of debauchery managed to give him that paunchy, yellowed appearance that elicits no admiration and fills any healthy, strongman [sic] with contempt and disgust” (257). The physical appearance of yellow fever in these men fully represents the contagious nature of ideas. These men have succumbed to the wickedness of American democratic capitalism and their corruption is evident in their yellow pallor.

In contrast to the sickly appearances of the acclimated citizens are the innocent victims of the fever. The first victim, Miss Dudley Evans, is described as “the perfect image of a saint, and if she had lived a hundred years earlier, she would certainly have been canonized” (56). The fact that she is the first to fall sick only further exemplifies her state of moral purity. Another such pure character is a young girl named Gertrude, a younger sister of Emil’s, whom Reizenstein describes as having forget-me-not blue eyes that “gazed out at the world so true-heartedly” (192). After a heroic effort to find aid for her ailing family, she succumbs to the disease.

Reizenstein reveals the devastation of yellow fever and its true cause through the experiences of the immigrating German family. Emil’s and Lajo’s acclimatization to the culture and politics of American society leads Emil’s parents and siblings into precarious conditions in which they are susceptible to the disease. It is ultimately the cultural and political actions of the greedy American democratic capitalist system that causes the disease. Emil, despite his German

aristocratic background and an aborted attempt to return home, quickly falls prey to the allure of the American way of life. That fall is clear after Emil finds out that his slave Tiberius has been sold. Revealing that Emil's pride as a slave owner is wounded, Reizenstein's narrator concludes that "one must know about certain practices among the Creoles, to which Emil had accustomed his German character immediately after arriving in New Orleans and which he bore on the whole in quite a proper manner" (456). Despite this, Emil still feels remorse for leaving his wife, Jenny, and in a tirade to Hiram asks himself how he could ever leave her and places the blame on his mistress, Lucy, whom he describes as "this money-loving whore, this slippery snake!" (463). Hiram quickly calms Emil by offering money. Emil at "the sight of money, which was in good notes drawn on the Citizens' Bank . . . was greatly relieved Jenny and her sister-in-law were forgotten, as were his dear parents" (467). Emil, like a "money-loving whore," is quick to forget his responsibilities at the sight of money. He has completely succumbed to the capitalistic system. And without his help, his family, his wife, and his sister-in-law are doomed to die. Emil will live, "but his disobedience, his poor fulfillment of his duty after he and Lucy left the upper chambers of the Atchafalaya Bank—O dreadful fate, for this disobedience his dear parents and his innocent siblings were to be punished" (503).

Lajos, Frida's husband, has similarly acclimated to the American system. Upon reaching America, Lajos has become a murderer and arsonist. He has set himself up in fraudulent business with Dubreuil and the Italian merchant, who hire themselves out as arsonists so that their clients can collect insurance money. Unfortunately, Emil's family resides in one of the building that Lajos is contracted to burn down. During the fire, Emil's mother braves the flames to save a portrait of Emil, only to have all the family's money ripped from her hands by Lajos. This act leaves the family destitute and forced to live in a filthy tenement which previously "had been

held by a black washerwoman who also practiced a horizontal profession” (431). It is in this tenement housing that his family contracts yellow fever and dies. Lajos’ greed leaves the family destitute without any means to properly care for themselves. Reizenstein, in this scene, explores the popular belief that sanitation and poverty are to blame for the spread of fever. However, Reizenstein shows that it is not the poor who should be blamed; it is the American capitalist society that rewards greed over the care of its impoverished. Similar to the afflictions of the priest Dubreuil and the Italian merchant, the disease that is truly catching in New Orleans, is capitalism.

Those who have acclimated themselves to the degenerate mores of the city are not the only ones implicated in the death of innocents in Reizenstein’s novel. The author also critiques those persons who should have been responsible for the alleviation of the suffering caused by yellow fever. Reizenstein describes a scene in which Gertrude, Emil’s sister, is searching for a doctor to save her family. Reizenstein addresses readers directly in his attempt to pull at their hearts: “The intelligent little face, which appears already to have seen things beyond the ken of children, has to capture the heart at the first glance, and when you see the child pale and suffering, you are driven to ask from the innermost part of your being: ‘Child, what’s the matter? And if I can help you, will you trust me?’” (421). Sadly for Gertrude, she meets no such sympathetic, trustworthy person who can help her. When she finally finds a doctor, he turns her out for not having payment up front. In Reizenstein’s novel, American doctors are embroiled in capitalistic greed and have little compassion for their patients unless a large sum of money is offered first. If not, they are quick to let them die.

Reizenstein also depicts American philanthropists as highly suspect. He writes, “[t]hese philanthropists from the ‘upper-ten’ class were often such base persons, despite their great

donations to charitable institutions, that whatever they gave with one hand they sought to win back again with the other, double or triple” (428). Reizenstein describes a wealthy housing proprietor who donates to the Howard Association, an organization that was much heralded as a saving force during yellow fever epidemics, but cares little for those suffering in his own tenements. Due to the epidemic, his wealthier tenants have fled the city, leaving much of the proprietor’s better housing empty. Despite his seemingly gracious donation, this gentleman makes no move to assist his tenants by offering them empty housing to nurse their sick. Thus, his pitiful donation could hardly compensate for his avaricious housing business. Further illustrating this horror, we find Emil’s family suffering from the fever in a similar tenement. The greed inherent in American capitalism is not in any way providing a cure for the disease. Not only is yellow fever’s presence a signifier of a society sickened by capitalism, but the greedy nature of the disease of capitalism also contributes to the spread and devastation of yellow fever.

Reizenstein uses the yellow fever epidemic to critique the materialistic nature of American democracy. It is the actions of the acclimatized immigrants and the native-born citizens of New Orleans that bring about the destruction of innocents. If Emil had not chosen money over his family, if the philanthropist had the compassion to open the better tenements to his suffering tenants, if the doctors could see past their payment to offer aid in a time of great need, Emil’s family might have lived or the suffering been minimized. Ultimately, however, if American greed could be restrained, the institution of slavery would be abolished and the threat of yellow fever would become a distant memory. However, in Reizenstein’s text, no character that lives is capable of such repentance. The death of Emil’s family and the other innocents can almost be interpreted as merciful in removing them from the earth before the terror of the slave rebellion comes to pass.

Despite Reizenstein's characterization of yellow fever as a divine scourge for slavery his depictions of African Americans, as Klotz points out, engages "in racist, eugenic thinking. Hence, Berlin and Gutman's observation that 'hatred of slavery and the slave frequently became one' is certainly apropos" (234). Reizenstein's text provides ample evidence of the author's belief in African Americans' innate knowledge of the disease, a knowledge that is inaccessible to whites. Moreover, all African Americans in his novel are depicted as hyper-sexualized. As we have seen before, yellow fever is not the only thing presumed to be contagious in New Orleans; greed and depraved sexual behavior also appear to be passed from person to person. While Reizenstein clearly doesn't share the puritanical views of sexuality held by his American counterparts, he constantly describes African Americans as either victims of sexual slavery, or engaging in the sexual enslavement of others, however, all under the service of whites. The frequent sexual encounters between African Americans and whites and the miscegenation that it encourages also contributes to the apocalyptic future that Reizenstein's novel predicts. Ultimately, it is the child of a mixed-race union who will bring about a slave rebellion and the destruction of the Southern Plantation system. Reizenstein plays upon the myth of New Orleans as a city of excess, an excess that is signified by a deadly fever, and an excess that encourages miscegenation. This miscegenation will bring about the eventual destruction of white New Orleans.

Many of the characterizations of African Americans in Reizenstein's novel are focused on their ravenous sexual appetite. Many of the women of African descent are brothel owners, and even Tiberius, the slave to Jenny and Frida, is constantly attempting to seduce their cook, the German born Urschl. Even though the mixed-race child of Emil and Lucy will bring about the end of slavery, Reizenstein is clearly fearful of the effects race mixing can have on human kind.

Reizenstein displays his proto-eugenic thinking by making note of the varying degrees of sensuousness in mixed race persons. Reizenstein writes, “A zambo Negro is the offspring of a Negro and a female mulatto. A *zambo negresse* is the *non plus ultra*, a ragingly insatiable sexual being. Owing to the crossing of the colored blood, one can call a *zambo negress* ‘man-crazy’ with emphasis” (236). Reizenstein ends his cataloguing with the “*pale chino zambo chola*, a colored creation with a dreadful confusion of species (a pitiful race)” (237). A pale chino zambo chola is a person with Indian, African, and white blood. In other words, Reizenstein clearly expresses his attitude that mixing races ultimately leads to “a pitiful race.” The overly sexualized nature of African Americans in Reizenstein’s text, threatens the purity of the white race. The African Americans in this text are always directing their sexual attention towards a white: Lucy Wilson towards Emil, Melina towards Lajos, and Tiberius towards Urschl.

In Reizenstein’s novel, not only does miscegenation lead to “a pitiful race,” but it is also linked to slave insurrection and revolution. Hiram’s goal, through the birth of a mixed race child, is to liberate the slaves in the American South. To do this, as prophesized, “‘Lucy will bear a son, who will be the liberator of her race. This son will fulfill his mission, no matter how many obstacles are placed in his way. On the day of liberation, when the chains fall to the ground everywhere with a jangling, the *Mantis Religiosa* [the plant that spreads yellow fever] will disappear forever’” (417). Reizenstein’s proto-eugenic beliefs about miscegenation and its link to slave insurrection predict a dismal future for the white American South.

This link to slave insurrection is also infused with African Americans’ innate knowledge of yellow fever. This myth is consistently perpetuated to make sense of the relative immunity African Americans had to the disease. The causes of yellow fever seemed to be well known among African Americans, while whites seem clueless. When Hiram first comes to Lucy Wilson

and Emil to explain his plan to liberate the slaves, his mention of the *Mantis Religiosa* is no surprise to Lucy, in contrast to her white lover, Emil. Hiram shows the couple a capsule “filled with many small translucent grains, each one containing in its center a tiny black point. ‘Is that the seed of the *Mantis Religiosa*?’ Lucy asked with a lowered voice, anxiously looking into the old man’s face” (66). As a person of African descent, Lucy’s knowledge of the plant and the damage that the plant could cause, if not innately known, is linked to knowledge only shared between people of African descent, a knowledge that is not shared with whites. Emil is completely unaware of the plant and its power.

Hiram, the antagonist of the novel, can also be interpreted as an example of the nineteenth-century belief that persons of African descent have a knowledge and power over the disease that whites do not. Hiram wields the plant that causes the disease as a revenge for slavery. Hiram is clearly not of African descent, but more importantly he is characterized as superhuman. Hiram, at times, is characterized as a Moses-like figure. He is at least a few hundred years old and seems to have been born in the United States. He was said to have “stood before the Inquisition of Louisiana in Baron de Carondelet’s time [the 1790s]” (312). He was one hundred and sixty years old when he sailed to New Orleans from Spain and “[t]he Inquisition of those days would have condemned me [Hiram] to death—but fortunately I understood the art of making myself invisible, so that I could reach the place of my birth, the source of the Red River, with safety” (480). The speculation over his origins and age and his ability to work roots connects Hiram to the folk spiritualism of Hoodoo. Zora Neale Hurston, who spent time in New Orleans in the late 1930s collecting “negro folk-lore,” explains in *Mules and Men* that Hoodoo is what whites pronounce as Voodoo (183). Hoodoo is comprised of West African, Native American, and European religious traditions. In Hoodoo, Moses is considered a conjurer.

Hurston notes that “Moses was the first man who ever learned God’s power-compelling words and it took him forty years to learn ten words. So he made ten plagues and ten commandments” (184). Like Moses in the book of Exodus, Hiram is able to wield a plague to free his people, and like the tenth plague, Passover, the innocents are the ones who die to liberate the slaves. Hiram’s characterization clearly plays upon the fears of Reizenstein’s white audience that yellow fever is controlled and spread by knowledge and a power that whites are not privy to.

Hiram is described as a cadaverous figure who repeatedly unleashes a plague that kills the innocent until slave liberation is obtained, which further cements him as an apocalyptic figure. He brings misery and death wherever he goes, and “[h]is face [is] the portrait of unspeakable care and sorrow, and despite the goodness of his heart, expressed in his manner, at first glance he [is] horrifying” (64). His birth took place in the same site that gave rise to the *Mantis Religiosa*; he can, therefore be seen as a curse generated from the land itself, sent forth to right the ills that have been wreaked upon it by Europeans. In a scene at the source of the *Mantis Religiosa*, Hiram calls upon the symbol of New Orleans, the crescent moon, to join his cause: “[i]f Hiram, the Circling Cross of the South, could win you as an ally in his holy struggle, your sickle would harvest the heads of his enemies and sever the chains of the helots!” (314). Clouds quickly cross the moon forming the numbers 1853. At this moment, Hiram recognizes that the city has joined his cause. The land itself is in agreement with his motives. This scene further cements the idea that yellow fever is retribution for the sins colonializing Europeans have committed on New World soil. Reizenstein views slavery as a terrible sin, a sin for which a horrifying figure such as Hiram, a Moses-like conjurer and an apocalyptic figure, will feel compelled to release a devastating plague that will liberate his people. Yellow fever thus

becomes the agent of divine retribution and the necessary suffering that will wash away the sins of the city and by extension the sins of the South.

Reizenstein's ultimate goal for his novel was to expose the hypocrisy of American capitalistic democracy. Yellow fever plays a critical role in revealing the greed in a capitalistic society that cares little about the well-being of the poor and sick and is willing to enslave others for the sake of a dollar. Despite Reizenstein's humanistic intentions, however, he accepts many of the racist assumptions of his era. While he clearly sees slavery as a sin, his African Americans characters, both free and enslaved, are hyper-sexual racialized stereotypes, and their cultural practices—particularly Hoodoo—are constructed in ways that exaggerate the threat they pose to white civilization.

Yellow fever, for Reizenstein's readers, was a fresh memory. The Epidemic of 1853 was the most devastating yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans history. Reizenstein's sensational and occasionally realistic novel reveals not only the struggles of immigrating to New Orleans, but the struggles of the American South. Yellow fever's existence in Reizenstein's novel is representative of the disease of American capitalism, which has incurred the wrath of a divine force and possibly even the wrath of the land on which those infected with capitalistic greed have committed their crimes. The assumptions of whites that those of African descent have knowledge and control over yellow fever reveals the believed threat of slave insurrection. While Reizenstein renders a novel that clearly sits in the abolitionist camp, his characterizations of the disease and of African Americans reveal his own conflicted beliefs of whites and people of color cohabitating peacefully. The debates surrounding slavery were already heading towards a violent culmination and the illness so closely aligned with African Americans and the issue of slavery and rebellion had just inflicted its most deadly blow against the iconic city.

Chapter 2: Contagious Sloth

George Washington Cable's perspective on yellow fever and New Orleans is unique because he, unlike Reizenstein and M.E.M. Davis, was born and raised in the city. His parents, however, were from the North: his mother from Indiana and his father from Pennsylvania. Because of his parentage, Cable was considered an American and not part of the Creole society. In fact, his writings about Creoles in Louisiana were very much reviled by Creole society. Rien Fertel explains in his essay "George Washington Cable and the Creole Backlash" that the Creoles felt Cable had "in a series of short stories and novels [. . .] painted them as a community overtaken by their Anglo-Saxon neighbors, a rag-worn gentry, a people without a future" (74). On the other hand, Cable's works were well received outside of New Orleans. Guidebooks about the city commonly included Cable's works as references, and, as Fertel also points out, "[t]he 'more sensible' [. . .] visitors even carried Cable's stories themselves as a tour guide to the city" (85). While Cable's reception was mixed, his works still exposed the complex nature of life in New Orleans. Cable's works focused on the experiences of immigrants, the struggles of Americanization, the complicated issue of race, all the while painting a portrait of Creole society as un-American and backwards. As a reformed secessionist, who had fought for the Confederate side in the Civil War, Cable dedicated much of his work to social reform. Many of his texts dealt with issues of race and class facing New Orleans and the American South after Reconstruction.

Cable's novel *The Grandissimes* is no exception. It is the story of a Creole family and their struggle to retain their political and economic dominance in the face of invading Americans after the Louisiana Purchase. The Creoles in Cable's novel are resistant to the changes that the Louisiana Purchase has caused and the issues needing to be faced surrounding racial equality.

Cable's novel was intended to act as a mirror to his own contemporary society, which faced similar issues during the post-Civil War and Reconstruction era. Cable wrote *The Grandissimes* in the late 1870s at the height of the South's struggles during Reconstruction. While it is a critique of early nineteenth-century Creole society and its stubborn adherence to European aristocratic class standards, it is also clear that Cable is using the Creoles to highlight a criticism of his own contemporary society, which is resistant to the changes brought by the end of the war, the end of Slavery, and the onslaught of Americans moving South.

In 1878, as Cable was working on his novel, New Orleans and a significant part of the southern United States experienced a devastating yellow fever epidemic, the worst in U.S. history. The epidemic struck not only New Orleans, but also travelled up the Mississippi River, decimating Memphis, and ultimately ending in Gallipolis, Ohio. Cable experienced this epidemic intimately when he lost both his son and a brother-in-law to the fever. The epidemic of 1878 hit at a time when the South was particularly vulnerable. Not only was the South suffering financially from the Civil War, but threat of yellow fever caused much of the nation to quarantine any ports accepting ships from the West Indies. There was much speculation about the cause of the illness, but many agreed that the trade ships coming from the tropics were the source of the fever. The quarantine culminated in massive financial losses. Acutely aware of these issues, Cable's novel envisions a future in which class and racial egalitarianism will alleviate the financial and social struggles of the South and eventually cure the devastating yellow fever epidemics that continually plagued the city.

Cable's novel, like Reizenstein's and Davis's, deals with immigration and migration to New Orleans. Yellow fever first appears in Cable's novel afflicting an American family with German parentage upon their arrival in New Orleans, seemingly confirming narrative that yellow

fever roots out physically unfit immigrants and migrants. The death of all but one member of this family reveals the devastating nature of the disease and how very real the threat of yellow fever was to immigrating and migrating populations. Not only was the disease devastating for immigrant and migrant populations, but it was also financially devastating for all inhabitants in New Orleans and by extension the American South. Cable found in yellow fever a cause around which the American South could unite with the immigrating and migrating American populations from the North. Heather Chacon points out in her essay “‘Public Health as Public Wealth’: Yellow Fever and New Orleans’s Trade Economy in George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes*,” that Cable as a reformed secessionist was committed to the idea of a unified nation and believed that the tragedy of yellow fever “could serve as a potential symbol of unity through mutual misfortune and a call for cooperative civil improvement” (6). Cable was able to use yellow fever not only to critique the Creole caste system, but also to show the similarities between the antiquated European aristocratic class system and the plantation system, which was the root of many of the struggles of his contemporary society. Cable’s version of yellow fever, which continues to devastate the South after the abolishment of slavery, signifies a sickness that stems from the lack of progressive action towards racial and class egalitarianism. As in *The Mysteries of New Orleans*, yellow fever’s persistence is due to the inability of this society to move away from its dependence on slavery. However, unlike Reizenstein, Cable sees a future for New Orleans and the South in the northern migrants who have the potential to lead the South toward progressive action towards racial equality and an eventual end to the yellow fever epidemics.

Also within Cable’s novel is a complicated racial system. As with Reizenstein, yellow fever’s destructiveness reveals the inherent greed in both the Creole and the plantation system.

Both relied heavily on slave labor and the trade ships that brought the disease to the New World, reintroducing the disease each year to New Orleans. Yellow fever in *The Grandissimes*, as with all three of these texts, is linked to African Americans. Similar to *The Mysteries of New Orleans*, yellow fever in *The Grandissimes* is characterized as a supernatural scourge caused by the curse of an enslaved African prince. Yellow fever in Cable's novel very literally stems from Africa. The continued affliction of yellow fever, to Cable's post-war readership, reveals that abolishing slavery is by no means the end of the race issue.

The Grandissimes features two protagonists: one is a progressive Creole named Honoré Grandissime, who believes that the institution of slavery is wrong but is unable to act due to the pressure of familial responsibility. The second is an American migrant named Joseph Frowenfeld whose resistance to Creole society, ultimately allows him to inspire Honoré to work for racial equality.

Frowenfeld's physical acclimatization to New Orleans starts with his recovery from yellow fever. Upon arrival in New Orleans, he and his family contract the disease and all but Frowenfeld die. In a graveyard, mourning the loss of his family, Frowenfeld meets and befriends Honoré Grandissime. It is Honoré who explains the nature of cultural acclimatization, of which yellow fever is only the beginning. Honoré explains that acclimatization is

“not in body only, that you have done; but in mind—in taste—in conversation—in convictions too, yes, ha, ha! They all do it—all who come. They hold out a little while—a very little, then they open their stores on Sunday, they import cargoes of Africans, they bribe the officials, they smuggle goods, they have colored housekeepers. My-de'-seh, the water must expect to take the shape of the bucket; eh?” (38)

In this passage, Cable performs his most scathing criticism of Creole society. For Cable, the Creoles live a hedonistic lifestyle above both law and God. Full acclimatization includes the acquisition of a physical constitution that can withstand fevers and the blazing sun as well as flexible principles that allows for slavery and illegal business practices. While Frowenfeld has acclimated physically, he questions Honoré's mores and resists adopting them. Honoré admits that the institution of slavery is wrong; however, he argues that "one man walks where he sees another's track; that is what makes a path; but you want a man, instead of passing around this prickly bush, to lay hold of it with his naked hands and pull it up by the roots" (39). Frowenfeld counters Honoré's argument by saying, "But a man armed with the truth is far from being barehanded" (39). The Creoles immersed in the social mores of their own culture cannot see a way out of that culture's ethically immoral practices. By not completely acclimating and by questioning Honoré, Frowenfeld becomes the mirror in which Honoré, a progressive Creole, is able to fully understand the actions that need to be taken so that his family and his society can move forward.

Honoré too experiences a kind of residual fever stemming from his inability to move past his loyalty to his family and society and towards a more equal future. Honoré explains to Frowenfeld that "there is a kind of tree not dreamed of in botany, that lets fall its fruit every day in the year—you know? We call it—with—reverence—'our dead father's mistakes.'" I have had to eat much of that fruit; a man who has to do that must expect to have now and then a little fever" (219). Yellow fever represents a pervasive cultural sickness, comprising both the immoral practices that perpetuate racial inequality and the festering resistance to change these immoral practices. The American Frowenfeld's resistance to acclimation allows Honoré to see a way in which he can move beyond the responsibility to his family and help to alleviate racial inequality

and end the South's affliction by yellow fever. In effect, Honoré begins to acclimate to the newcomer.

Similar to Reizenstein, Cable is clear that slavery is an immoral institution and that reparations must be made if the nation is to move forward. However, also like Reizenstein, Cable's treatment of African Americans exposes his and the white post-slavery South's anxieties about how to deal with the issue of race. Michael Kreyling explains in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Grandissimes* that "though Cable argues . . . that slavery is an unsupportable institution, rooted in no legitimate law, but in a diseased social convention, he is not entirely free from the pervasive racism of his own age" (xv-xvi). Like Reizenstein's novel, Cable's text is rife with anxieties about miscegenation and the role of mixed-race persons in his society. Cable's depictions of yellow fever coincide with the prevailing beliefs that African Americans are immune due to a knowledge of the disease that is clearly unavailable to whites. African Americans are depicted as skilled caretakers of those suffering from yellow fever, but they are also depicted as having the power to inflict others, albeit justly, with the disease.

Every scene in *The Grandissimes* involving yellow fever is linked to an African American character. Frowenfeld, during his battle with yellow fever, is assisted by a black nurse. In a fever dream, Frowenfeld imagines that he is on a boat and "[t]he crew was a single old negress, whose head was wound about with a blue Madras handkerchief, and who stood at the prow, and by a singular rotary motion, rowed the barge with a teaspoon" (12). In Frowenfeld's fever dream, the black nurse is figured as a ferryman with the ability to ferry him either to the land of the dead or the land of the living. Another character, Palmyre, is "noted for her taste and skill as a hair-dresser, for the efficiency of her spells and the sagacity of her divinations, but most of all for the chaste austerity with which she practiced [sic] the less baleful rites of the voodoo"

(60). Lafcadio Hearn in his sketch “The Death of Marie Laveau” reveals that it was Marie Laveau who was “whispered to have inspired George Washington Cable’s ‘Palmyre’” (70). Marie Laveau was also a hairdresser and a well-respected practitioner of Voodoo in New Orleans during the nineteenth century. Hearn points out that “[i]n the great epidemic of 1853, a committee of citizens was appointed to wait upon her, and beg her to lend her aid to the fever-smitten, numbers of whom she saved” (71). Likening Palmyre to the real-life voodoo priestess Marie Laveau further links the immunity of African Americans with the supernatural. Palmyre, however, spends much of the novel attempting to use Voodoo to kill Agricola. Voodoo in Cable’s text is still something to be feared; however, it is applied retributively. Agricola is a figure who not only has inflicted harm on Palmyre, but stands in the way of class and racial egalitarianism. The Voodoo powers that were believed to have saved the citizens of New Orleans in the 1853 yellow fever epidemic can just as easily be used to punish.

Yellow fever as a destructive, retributive supernatural force is further explored with the character of Bras-Coupé. The legend of Bras-Coupé exists outside of Cable’s rendering of him. He was a fugitive slave who lived in the swamps and formed a group of highwaymen. Bras-Coupé means “without arm” and the story of how his arm came to be severed varies. In one report the arm was severed by his master and in another it was shot off by police in an attempt to capture him. Either way, Bras-Coupé existed as a symbol of slave defiance. In Cable’s novel, however, Bras-Coupé functions as a symbol of the damage caused by slavery. Despite retaining both his arms, Bras-Coupé names himself “without arm” on the auction block, and in doing so “made himself a type of all Slavery, turning into flesh and blood the truth that all Slavery is maiming” (Cable 171). Bryan Wagner, in his essay “Disarmed and Dangerous: The Strange Career of Bras-Coupé,” explains that “[b]y turning a slave maimed by the police into the

unmaimed vehicle for the expression of the truth that all slavery is maiming, Cable sublimates violence into metaphysics” (129). Essentially Bras-Coupé is only symbolically “without arm,” which allows slavery to be interpreted as acts of physical violence that also sever one’s sense of self.

Bras-Coupé is an African prince who was caught and enslaved. Upon arriving in New Orleans, he was bought by Agricola Fusilier who then sold him to Don José Martinez, the husband of Honoré Grandissimes’s sister. Bras-Coupé is characterized using animal imagery as a “bull, with his long, keen horns and blazing eye” but closer to a “rhinoceros” (172). Bras-Coupé resembles not just a fierce, powerful animal, but also an exotic one. Like Hiram, Bras-Coupé is surrounded by a supernatural aura. When shot by an overseer for an attempted escape, the pistol ball “struck him in the forehead, and running around the skull in search of a penetrable spot . . . came out despairingly, exactly where it had entered” (172). Bras-Coupé also practices Voodoo. In fact, Palmyre’s own knowledge of Voodoo was learned from him. Upon being insulted at his wedding to Palmyre, Bras-Coupé calls upon the Voudou-Magnan, causing a storm that bursts: “[a] whiff like fifty witches floated up the canvas curtain of the gallery and a fierce black cloud, drawing the moon under its cloak, belched forth a stream of fire that seemed to flood the ground” (180). Under the cover of this storm, Bras-Coupé escapes. Palmyre is devastated by the loss of her husband, not for love, for she is in love with the white Honoré Grandissime and finds being married to a black man detestable. She is devastated because she believed that Bras-Coupé was her salvation. She had hoped to use Bras-Coupé to achieve liberation for “[s]he had heard of San Domingo . . . The lesson she would have taught the giant was Insurrection” (184).

Bras-Coupé’s curse leaves a lasting impression on the mind of Don José Martinez. Martinez’s indigo crops fail and “[t]he negroes said that Bras-Coupé had cursed the land” (184).

Fever and death plague even his slaves. The following year Martinez's plantation again experiences failing crops and fevers, and Martinez himself eventually succumbs to the yellow fever. On his deathbed Bras-Coupé appears and demands his wife, Palmyre. The sickly Martinez refuses. Bras-Coupé once more curses Martinez: "May this house, and all in it who are not women, be accursed" (187). Then Bras-Coupé escapes again only to be caught and killed.

In depicting yellow fever as retributive supernatural force wielded by an enslaved African prince, Cable is able to create a situation in which slavery and slave insurrection end in mutually assured destruction. This scene is similar to the apocalyptic vision Reizenstein has for New Orleans. Just before Martinez dies, he is visited by Agricola with news of a newly introduced sugar crop that can withstand the worms that have so plagued his plantation. Agricola describes an optimistic future for Martinez's land: "Oh Señor, it will make you strong again to see your fields all cane and the long rows of negroes and negresses cutting it, while they sing their song of those droll African numerals, counting the canes they cut" (188). Agricola's idealistic rendering is a far cry from the reality of sugar cane cultivation. Ned Sublette points out that the sugar crop "ate slaves alive and required their frequent replacement. The grueling peak-season workday killed skilled laborers within a few years and left female workers too feeble to reproduce" (225). Despite the threat of mutually assured destruction, the Creole response to fever and crop failure is to find a new crop that depends even more heavily on slave labor. Racial inequality and slavery are so ingrained in the Creole mindset that Agricola and Martinez are unable to realize that the true end of this destruction is to end slavery and move towards a society of racial equality.

Despite Cable's intention to promote racial equality, he was still very much a product of his society. The character of Bras-Coupé is only effective as a sort of noble savage. Like Cable's

treatment of race, his prescription for the South is incomplete. At the end of the novel, Honoré, through the help of Frowenfeld, has restructured his family's finances and gone into business with his half-brother, Honoré f.m.c. (free man of color). Frowenfeld has become a successful pharmacist. Both are happily married, and aligning themselves with the business practices of the Americans brings them wealth. However, as Honoré is making these changes, yellow fever is again on the rise. Honoré f.m.c. takes his own life and Palmyre is forced to move to France, where Honore sends payments to her from his deceased brother's fortunes. Cable seems unsure of the role that African Americans should play as society makes strides towards racial equality. The reappearance of yellow fever suggests that these problems cannot be cured overnight and may take generations to completely heal. But if society is unwilling to acknowledge the destructive force of racial inequality and make strides to correct this issue, it will forever be unable to cure yellow fever. Yellow fever's persistence signifies his society's lack of progressive action towards racial and class egalitarianism.

Cable's readers in the post-Reconstruction South suffered from financial failures, tense race relations, and yellow fever, similar to the experiences of the characters in his novel at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. The threat of yellow fever was fresh in the minds of Cable's readers, and he hoped to illustrate how the ending of slavery had not limited its destructive force. The scourge of yellow fever, for Cable, is the signifier of a society unwilling to take progressive action towards egalitarianism and holding fast to an old caste system, in the case of the Creoles, or the plantation system, in the case of his contemporaries. By refusing to acknowledge the horrific nature of slavery or to repair the relations between the races and between the northern and southern states his society had effectively made the achievement of a peaceful and healthy society impossible.

Chapter 3: Contagious Lust

Like Cable, Mollie Evelyn Moore Davis also suggests that a brighter future for New Orleans is only possible with the assistance of the newcomer. M.E.M. Davis, as she was known, was born in Benton County, Alabama in 1844 and in 1855 she moved to West Texas, where her father practiced medicine. In 1874, she married Thomas E. Davis, who lost his tobacco fortune in 1875. Four years later, the couple moved to New Orleans. There Thomas Davis found work as an editorial writer with *The Picayune*, which later became the *Times Picayune* when it merged with *The New Orleans Times* in 1914.

Davis's novel *The Queen's Garden* was published in 1900 just as the cause of the disease was being discovered. Nonetheless, it also treats the disease as a floating signifier, this time to critique the highly sexualized nature of New Orleans and the aristocratic class system upheld by Creole society. *The Queen's Garden* expresses the anxieties of Americans attempting to acclimate to the distinctively different society of New Orleans at the turn of the century. Like Reizenstein, Davis focuses her descriptions of the city on its sensuousness and moral decay. As with Cable, though, Davis's real criticism is of the Creole city and its adherence to an immovable caste system at odds with the tenets of American democracy. Her novel tells the story of a young woman, Noel Lepeyre, who comes to New Orleans to be chaperoned by her father's sister. Davis's protagonist is forced to negotiate the sensuous character of New Orleans, all the while discovering the dark secrets of her family's history.

Davis's novel is distinct from the other two in that it explores the process of acclimatization from the perspective of a woman. Davis uses yellow fever and New Orleans to create a space in which a woman is able to explore her own sexuality and ultimately discover

some sense of agency. However, like Reizenstein and Cable, Davis employs the racist stereotypes so prevalent in her culture in her depictions of African Americans and yellow fever.

Noel Lepeyre, the protagonist in *The Queen's Garden*, is thin, plain, and exceedingly innocent. Orphaned at a young age, Noel has lived an austere life depending on her mother's family for support. In contrast to Noel's innocent and austere appearance are the exotic descriptions of the landscape and people of her new home. On the train Noel finds that "[t]he landscape, poetic, semi-tropical, unfamiliar, harmonized, to . . . [her] dreaming fancy, with the foreign speech of a group of girls" (2). Noel concludes that "[a]pparently there was nothing foreign about herself except her name. Her fluttering neighbors were dark-haired, velvet-eyed, plump, bewitching. Noel was tall and slim—much too meagre, indeed, for beauty" (2). Noel finds herself enchanted, but behind the bewitching, exotic imagery is something ominous. The Mississippi River, as Noel crosses it, is "motionless under the darkening sky. Only a bit of driftwood swirling by, here and there betrayed the treacherous undercurrent at that moment gnawing away the very point upon which the ferry-landing was constructed" (12). While the landscape may be poetic, harmonious, and placid, beneath it something gnaws at the very ground Noel walks on, waiting to consume her. Noel longs to become a part of her new home, but the narrator hints that there is a cost to acclimating.

In contrast to the river, the French Quarter very visibly reveals the filth and debauched nature of the city. The streets are filled with nauseating sewage and street urchins. Just a "half square away" from her aunt's home is a house of ill repute (19). The threatening streets of the Quarter are soon forgotten once Noel is safely behind the walls of her aunt's mansion. The garden, in which Noel spends most of her days, is enchanting and sensuous. The garden reminds her of "far-off islands of citron and spice, of lithe brown lads and slender, large-hipped girls,—

the land of the pomegranate and the nightingale, the land of the Thousand and One Nights” (73). The garden is full of the exotic, poetic imagery of the landscape described during Noel’s train ride.

Upon arrival at her aunt’s house, Noel learns that her aunt has fallen ill with the fever, and due to the laws surrounding the illness, both are to be quarantined from the city as well as from each other. Thus Noel is deprived of her only chaperone. Now unsupervised, Noel becomes more aware of her desires and how those desires physically affect her body. In New Orleans, in her aunt’s garden, Noel is free. Davis writes that Noel is like “[t]he dragon-fly just escaped from the chrysalis . . . trying its wings for the first time, giddy with a sense of freedom, and loath to alight!” (58). Her new-found freedom, the sensuous and exotic nature of the garden and, by extension, New Orleans, encourage Noel to psychologically and physically awaken. She relinquishes her austere garments of black for white muslin. Noel is also exposed to beautiful and luxurious things and allows herself to enjoy them. Davis writes, “[a]ll the repressed girlhood within Noel Lepeyre, with its instinctive love for pretty and dainty things, bubbled to the surface. She danced across the bare polished floor, —which reflected her figure like a still mountain lake,—to the swinging cheval glass” (47).

Noel’s transformation is not limited to materialism and vanity. She is also tempted by physical pleasures. Noel meets a young journalist living next door. In the fairytale imagery of Noel’s mind, a young man comes to court her. He leaves red roses on the balcony. She imagines that “[i]t must have been the Beast!” (66). Noel physically responds to these tokens of love. She feels “herself suddenly alone; a desire for companionship possessed her; a sick longing seized her which seemed to turn all her body, now hot, now cold” (66). Noel’s innocent

interpretation of physical attraction is that she is suffering from a physical illness that sounds very much like a fever.

Her courtship and transformation climaxes as she meets her lover, Richard, one night in the garden. While pledging their love to each other the two witness the blossoming of a night-blooming flower: “Snow-white and lovely, like a bride awaiting her bridegroom, the exquisite blossom, wide open,—a radiant wheel,—swayed as if to spirit music on the up-curved bracket-like stem; the slender petals whispered to some invisible Presence; the golden heart quivered as if under the caress of an unseen lover” (103). This highly coded night scene of quivering buds and love pledges represents Noel and Richard physically pledging their love to each other. The flower’s opening signifies Noel sexually opening herself up to Richard. Upon parting, Richard warns Noel of the terrible illness that is spreading through New Orleans. She is to be especially careful since she is not a native—and possibly because she has just committed an act of indulgence.

The next morning Noel finds herself feeling heavy and slow-moving. She goes into the garden to look at the flower. However, illustrating the consequences of succumbing to the temptation of excess, the flower is in a state of ruin. The flower is “[a]n unsightly semblance of a refolded bud drooped upon an inert discolored stem. A few limp, yellowish white petals straggled from the inclosing sheath; a sickly odor exhaled from them. It was like a corpse from which even the still beauty of death had departed” (109-110). The garden that was once beautiful is transformed into a scene of death and ruination. The garden that once protected Noel, now resembles the filthy depravity of the Quarter. Like the treacherous current that gnaws away at the landing, the garden reveals itself to have a sinister nature that lured Noel and her lover into an act of excess. Like the flower Noel also shows physical signs of ruination and death. Like the flower

she is wilted. She looks on the garden with “bloodshot eyes, whose luminous gray was faded to a wan yellow” (116). Noel’s sexual act with Richard has corrupted her and she is, in fact, afflicted with yellow fever.

Davis uses yellow fever to signify Noel’s sexual transgressions and her transformation from a once snow-white, innocent flower, into a yellowing, feverish, ruined body. Noel’s fever is linked to her transformation from a repressed, innocent girl into a sensuous woman. As in *The Mysteries of New Orleans*, Noel’s ill appearance is linked to her acclimating to the sensuous ways of the city.

Noel’s aunt’s affliction with yellow fever symbolizes the decaying values and mores of Creole society. Like Cable, Davis is critical of Creole society for adherence to an aristocratic caste system. Much of Noel’s aunt’s house is described as decadent and very much in the fashion of the Old World. Her own bedroom is described as having a “Psyche dressing-table draped with dotted muslin; and cheval glass, much spotted and discolored within its heavy frame. A bronze clock, silent and somber on the mantel, bore the date of the first French Empire” (46). Noel finds her room to be impressive, and Davis makes sure to highlight pieces that emphasize the French roots of this Creole culture. The home plays a crucial role also in Davis’s criticism of the Creole’s adherence to European ways. Davis describes the drawing room from Noel’s naïve perspective:

A funereal atmosphere pervaded the dim vastness. The antique furniture, cumbrous, obsolete, and handsome . . . The priceless pictures on the walls were wellnigh [sic] meaningless to her uneducated eyes; great dark forest landscapes, peopled with fleeing nymphs and pursuing gods; Greek temples once white, now

fallen yellow and cracked on their wooded heights; sallow martyres [sic], blue-mantled virgins, somber crucifixions. (60)

In this description, Noel represents the typical American, disconnected from European aesthetic appreciation, which makes her more valuable in Davis's eyes than the aesthetes who created the room. The representations of high art are described as funereal, as if dead and useless. The description of the religious imagery of the Catholic Church emphasizes its decadence and vanity. Here Davis is critiquing European aestheticism, suggesting that it is an obstacle to American progress and a dangerously hedonistic and vain indulgence. Davis criticizes Creoles for holding fast to Old World values.

The funereal atmosphere foreshadows Noel's aunt's eventual demise, while Noel, who represents the newly Americanized New Orleans, survives. The characters' demise or recuperation can be said to hinge on a particular decision that both Noel and her aunt make. Noel learns, while in the garden, that an old fairytale her father used to tell her of a queen whose lover would visit her in her garden was in fact a very real love story involving her aunt. The lover was a good friend of Noel's father who is later revealed to be Dr. Grafton. Her aunt's choice of family and class over her lover caused Noel's father to sever ties with his family. Dr. Grafton is unable to save Noel's aunt and thus loses his love forever. However, Noel makes a very important choice that saves her life. As she is stumbling through the garden sick with yellow fever, she hears the moans of her lover coming from the house next door. Instead of returning to the safety of her aunt's mansion, Noel climbs the iron bars and wisteria vines to administer to her ill lover next door. Dr. Grafton, called to administer to Richard, is thus made aware of her need for treatment and is able to save both Richard and Noel. Noel was forced to make a choice

similar to that of her aunt. However, Noel's salvation lies in her choosing love over class. She thus limited her acclimatization by refusing to adhere to the strict aristocratic class structure.

In her novel, Davis explores two possible narratives about the spread of yellow fever. While Noel sickens after acting upon her sexual desires, the far graver sin is to deny one's heart for the sake of class status. The funereal images pervasive throughout Noel's aunt's house and the eventual death of her aunt remind us of Cable's critique of an immovable Creole society unwilling to change and move towards a more just, progressive future.

While the three texts differ, not just by time period, but by objects of criticism, the common thread between all three is their treatment of race in relation to yellow fever. Davis's text also contains descriptions of African Americans as supernatural, yet primitive. Davis, illustrating the racialized cultural beliefs surrounding African Americans and yellow fever, uses Marcelle, her aunt's mulatto housekeeper, to highlight the exotic nature of New Orleans. When Noel first meets Marcelle, she fearfully wonders "[w]hat if this meagre, weazened, yellow old creature were one of those wicked enchantresses of whom she had read? One of those voodoo witches who tole [sic] young girls to destruction" (26). Marcelle, to the naïve Noel, is characterized as a nefarious person with supernatural powers.

As we saw with Reizenstein and Cable, the issue of African American immunity to yellow fever complicated the issue of white racial superiority. Davis's novel also employs a yellow fever narrative that includes African Americans having a knowledge of the disease that is inaccessible to whites and thus a control over the disease which at whim can either infect others or cure those inflicted. Like Reizenstein and Cable, Davis illustrates the connection between supernatural power and African Americans in a ritualistic scene. Upon finding out that her

mistress is sick with “la fievre jaune,” Marcelle is discovered by Noel partaking in a ceremony of sorts:

[C]rouched in a kneeling posture against the wall; her long skinny arms, bare to the shoulder, were raised above her head; her face under the dim light of the hall lamp was drawn and distorted. She rocked herself from side to side in a paroxysm of grief, or anger . . . three figures standing near her, menacing her with signs and harsh whispers! . . . In their long yellowish white robes; and their strange head-coverings, which were drawn across the lower part of their faces, leaving visible only their angry and threatening eyes; visions of the Holy Inquisition and its terrible emissaries darted through her brain. (35-36)

The nature of this ceremony is never fully revealed. The “angry and threatening eyes” leave us feeling that Marcelle might be bringing the illness to the house herself, damning her mistress. Noel’s childish imagination leaves the reader to question her impressions of the situation as well as her knowledge of the practices of African Americans. It could just as likely be a ritual to ward off the illness.

Marcelle notices Noel watching the ritual and shoos her away. She comes to her later and explains that her aunt is sick with yellow fever. In so doing she expresses her frustration at having to deal with doctors. She believes that the doctors “‘are imbeciles, in those linen duster which make h’everybody afraid. Me, I did not desire those doctor. Have I not nurse that yellow fiev’? Ees eet that I do not know the tisanes for that fiev’? . . . As eef m’sieu, the husband of Madame Chreitien, has not die of that fiev’ in these arm!’ . . . She stretched out her arms, uttering an indignant snarl” (38-39). Marcelle believes that the doctors only encourage fear and that her knowledge of the disease is superior. However, we also learn in this passage that Noel’s

uncle died of yellow fever and in the arms of Marcelle. There's a slight hint that she could be responsible for his death. Davis' descriptions of Marcelle and her knowledge about yellow fever still reveal the same racializing beliefs expressed by Reizenstein almost fifty years earlier. Davis's ambiguous treatment of Marcelle also aligns her narrative with Cable's struggle to truly answer the issues of racial inequality.

Davis's treatment of yellow fever, at the turn of the twentieth century, reveals that many of the prevailing beliefs about yellow fever, race, and New Orleans had not changed in almost fifty years since Reizenstein's novel. Like Reizenstein, Davis sees New Orleans' exotic and sensuous nature as threatening; this acclimatizing is something the immigrant should not accept easily. And like Cable, Davis is critiquing the immovable caste system of the Creoles and their resistance to the American capitalistic system that encourages equality among the classes. Noel's salvation lies in the skills of a doctor who was previously rejected by her aunt's strict adherence to her own class system. Davis's text also reveals the racializing attitudes surrounding yellow fever and African Americans that prevailed throughout and beyond the nineteenth century. However, what truly sets Davis's text apart is the space that yellow fever creates for Noel, a young woman, to explore her own sexuality and ultimately the agency to make a decision about her own future. Noel's experience in New Orleans and with yellow fever transformed her into a woman capable of making decisions of social and even political consequences. Like Frowenfeld, in *The Grandissimes*, Noel's refusal to fully acclimate to her new home reveals a path to a more equal society and a vision for a more American New Orleans.

Conclusion

In his short story “Fever” John Edgar Wideman writes “Nothing is an accident. Fever grows in the secret places of our hearts, planted there when one of us tried to sell one of us to another” (133). The notion that disease can stem from a moral corruption deep within is an old idea that is still with us today. In centuries past, illness was believed to come not from the outside forces of unseen microbes, but from within the body. The practice of bloodletting and prescriptions of mercury were common procedures to purge the body of the disorders within. Yellow fever’s presence for Reizenstein, Cable, and Davis reveals more about the disorders and disturbances of a Southern city in America in the nineteenth century than about the nature of the disease itself. Yellow fever became the focal point for the anxieties caused by the Louisiana Purchase and the flood of immigrants and Americans into the region. Threatened by yellow fever, native New Orleanians quarantined themselves, literally and figuratively, from the sickening populations by focusing on the physical and moral weaknesses of the newcomer. The newcomer, on the other hand, believed that yellow fever was a sickness stemming from native New Orleanians’ upholding of immoral practices such as slavery and race inequality or a strict adherence to an aristocratic class system.

As much as the tropes associated with yellow fever help to focus the social conflicts of post-Louisiana Purchase New Orleans, they also have a lot to teach us about American society as a whole at various moments in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Reizenstein’s novel plays upon American anxieties surrounding the legitimacy of slavery, fears of slave rebellion, and, in some ways, is prophetic in his vision of a country that would soon go to war. Cable is a little less apocalyptic and more prescriptive in his attempt to cure the ills of New Orleans and the post-Civil War South. For Cable, at the end of Reconstruction, the wounds caused by slavery still

festered. Davis shared similar sentiments about Creole society with Reizenstein and Cable; however, she also exposed the burgeoning anxieties about the role of women in society. (It is important to note that Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, was published just a year before Davis's.)

Remaining a constant thread through these narratives, which span close to fifty years, is the racialization that existed, and may still exist, in ideas about disease. All three of these authors used the same primitivistic and supernatural narratives of African Americans associated with yellow fever. In each novel, an African American figure partakes in some form of supernaturalism involving yellow fever: Hiram acts as a Moses figure wielding the plant that causes the disease, Bras-Coupé curses his master with the disease, and Marcelle is witnessed performing a primal, supernatural ritual, the motive of which is never revealed.

In looking historically at how a population reacts to the threat of disease, one wonders what social structures, practices, and inequalities are revealed about our own society when outbreaks and pandemics occur. How has American society reacted to the threat of HIV/AIDS, Swine flu, SARS, and most recently Ebola? What narratives did we create in an attempt to protect ourselves from the threat and spread of these diseases? Medical technology has most definitely progressed since the nineteenth century. However, today we still charge infected individuals with immorality. We may be less inclined to believe in supernatural control over a disease, but 30,000 people still die of yellow fever each year, with the majority of infections and deaths in Africa. America has been without yellow fever epidemics since 1905. Yellow fever isn't the only illness ravaging Africa. Is it possible that many of our past prejudices still keep us silent and immovable when faced with the suffering of others? Invisible microbes that are spread

by human interaction still cause us to look for more visible ways to protect ourselves from disease and at times, quarantine ourselves from each other.

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